

"Multiculturalism" is a convenient catchword borrowed from Canadian politics to represent a vague set of ideas which purportedly promotes the cultural and economic interests of certain non-Anglomorph sections of the Australian community. If proponents of multiculturalism are asked to describe the concept it is likely that there will be as many descriptions as there are proponents.

Multiculturalism in Canada is an historic compromise struck between the descendants of English-speaking settlers and their French-speaking counterparts. French Canadians were settled in Canada before the British; colonisations and have since remained a linguistically distinct community. They constitute the vast majority of the population of Quebec, one-third of New Brunswick and significant proportions of Ontario and Manitoba. In Canada, multiculturalism represents a formula for the a harmonious coexistence of the two major communities and serves to safeguard the unity and integrity of the nation. These considerations have no relevance in the Australian context, and hence multiculturalism in Australia must have some other justification. But one can make no headway in this direction without an adequate understanding of what the concept means.

At the least contentious level, multiculturalism entails the recognition that in Australia there exist different cultural groups. At this level the concept is a purely factual assertion which can have minimal effect on policy. At the opposite end are notions of multiculturalism which an. assert the right of each ethnic community to maintain its language and culture on Australian soil, if necessary with the assistance of public funded programmes. Somewhere in between stands Senator Gareth Evans who conceives multiculturalist policy in the supremely vague terms of "programmes, including those supported from the public purse, expressly designed to create a more open-textured and tolerant social environment" (*Quadrant*, May 1982,p.5).

The multicultural debate has also been confused by the inclusion in it of the rights and interests of the Aboriginal population. The position of Aborigines is historically and otherwise distinct from that of other ethnic groups. The Australian Aborigine is found only in Australia, and so are his language and culture. The centres of Italian, Greek or Chinese culture are elsewhere. Whatever happens in Australia will have no consequence for the survival of these cultures in their respective homelands. The survival of Aboriginal culture and language on the other hand depends solely on what happens in Australia. Therefore as regards the preservation of cultures themselves, there are considerations which apply uniquely to Aboriginal culture. The Aboriginal question is a separate debate and should not be confused with the questions regarding the cultural interests of other groups.

Multiculturalism of the type sought to be practised in Australia is fundamentally flawed by a retrogressive conception of culture itself. This conception regards culture as something static, to be preserved in its purity wherever the member of that cultural group reside. Culture is not static even in isolated communities. It is in constant evolution through interaction between human beings and between human beings and their environment. In isolated communities culture may evolve slowly and may even appear to be static. But in communities which interact with other communities, rapid cultural evolution is to be expected. When a small community interacts with a large community it is inevitable that the elements of the more prevalent culture will tend to predominate in the evolutionary outcome. Thus when a small group of Greeks or Italians translocate themselves into an Anglomorph environment, it is inevitable that they will become assimilated into the larger community if not in the first generation, in the generations to follow.

The reverse process has taken place where small groups of Anglomorphs migrated to non-Anglomorph societies as happened in countries such as Argentina. British Colonial administrators were somewhat of an exception as they isolated themselves in the colonial outposts. Even so, Englishmen who returned from the colonies showed distinct signs of exposure to foreign cultures. In Sri Lanka, the English and Scottish plantation managers became a distinct breed of Englishmen or Scotsmen under the local cultural influence. Many had problems of resettling in Britain and a few even returned to Sri Lanka to live out their retirement. This happened despite the isolation and aloofness of the European community on the island.

When the different cultural groups are exposed to one another's influence, it is unavoidable that the cultures will interact and that the culture of the numerically superior group will tend to assimilate the cultures of the others. However, this does not mean that the culture which is assimilated will not leave its marks on the predominant culture. Nor should it be so, for, as T.S. Eliot wrote:

'The country which receives culture from abroad without having anything to give in return, and the country which aims to impose its culture on another, without accepting anything in return, will both suffer from this lack of reciprocity'â€” (T.S. Eliot, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, "Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot", ed Frank Kermode (Faber and Faber, London 1975) p.303.)

Despite the cliché "when in Rome, do as the Romans do", it is evident from history that Rome itself was transformed by its absorption of barbarian communities into its legal economic and social structure.

Multiculturalism, as currently conceived in Australia, seeks to retard (for it is impossible to arrest) this process of interaction and evolution. It involves the pouring of vast quantities of public money into an enterprise which must inevitably and eventually fail. To maintain for any length of time the cultural distinctiveness of different groups, much more than money is needed. It needs an iron clad system of apartheid or self-imposed inward looking communal traditions. As the unfolding events in South Africa show, even a system of apartheid cannot indefinitely withstand the pressures-of integration. Even if such an enterprise has a theoretical chance of success, its goal is unacceptable from the point of view of human development. The real chance is that multiculturalism will fail in its objective of keeping the cultures distinct but will ferment inter-communal disharmony.

The question is do we want an Australian culture or a collection of distinct ethnic cultures? Does the fact that Anglomorph features are likely to predominate in an Australian culture make the achievement of such a national culture any less desirable?

The next question is who needs multiculturalism? Certainly non-Anglomorph migrants will be initially disadvantaged by language and cultural factors. Yet the transitional problems of new immigrants can be addressed without State-sponsored programmes for the preservation of ethnic cultures. The goals of alleviating transitional hardship and of culture propagation have often been deliberately confused. The larger objectives of multiculturalism have been undertaken without an indication of support even from ethnic communities. They have the endorsement of organised interest groups within such communities but there is no evidence of enthusiasm for them in the communities themselves.

A Morgan Gallup poll of voter intentions between April 1981 and March 1982 disclosed that even among Australians born overseas, the distribution amongst parties were roughly similar to Australian-born voters (*The Bulletin*, August 10th, 1982). According to that poll, the "overseas-born" support for the ALP was 48.64% whereas its national proportion was 47.46%. The corresponding figures for the Coalition were 39.59% and 41.59%. Two significant facts emerged from the poll. One was that the distribution of "overseas-born" support for the parties did not significantly vary from the national distribution despite the fact that the ALP was more closely identified with multiculturalism whereas the Coalition has been traditionally portrayed as a party of Anglophiles. The second was that overseas-born Chinese Australians, who, in recent years, have attracted the greatest resentment gave the Coalition a greater proportion of its support than the Coalition received nationally (53.57% as against 39.59%).

The poll was also significant in that it did not indicate the preferences of Australian-born ethnics, or the second and third generation descendants of migrants. These are the Australians who have become assimilated into the mainstream of the cultural life and who are among the best qualified to pronounce judgement on the multicultural theories of patronising Anglomorphs.

For all its rhetoric, multiculturalist policies have been mainly directed at two objectives, namely language retention through class room teaching and the provision of cultural entertainment through publicly funded ethnic television and radio. As regards language teaching, no one can deny the edifying experience of learning Italian, Greek, French, German, Arabic or Chinese, not to mention many other rich languages spoken by migrants. But there is a difference between teaching language for its educational value and teaching it in pursuance of the illusory goals of multiculturalism. If education is the objective, then priorities must be determined rationally after talking account of resources, costs and benefits. In this regard it must not be forgotten that the urgent demand of both educationists and ethnic Australians is to increase facilities for teaching English to migrants disadvantaged by language.

The fallacy of the assumption that migrants want multiculturalism is clear from the performance of ethnic television. The McNair Anderson Survey revealed that in 1982 only 15% of the ethnic population watched the Melbourne broadcasts of SBS Television compared with 22, 27 and 32 per cent for the commercial channels. The channel had become a luxury catering to the "film festival set" or as Senator Button described, the "middle-class Australians too lazy to go to continental cinemas". (*The Bulletin*, August 10, 1982). The ethnic communities are not buying the multicultural products peddled by governments. Yet the multicultural faith continues to be blindly preached and practised.

It might be possible to dismiss multiculturalism as another ineffectual exercise in social engineering if not for the fact that, even if it fails in its stated aims, it might still succeed in sowing the seeds of communal discord. Australia is among the fortunate countries of the world which has the capacity to culturally unify diverse peoples with minimum trauma. Many countries, for mainly historical and political reasons, have immense problems of resolving conflicts between competing cultures which resist integration. Sri Lanka, my own country of birth, is a prime example. Ever since the unifying element of a common language (English) was removed by chauvinistic politicians, the two minor lingual communities have treated one another with mistrust and hostility. Australia fortunately has no similar problem as yet. But the multicultural policy creates one where none exists. The violence that erupted at a recent soccer match between Sydney City and Sydney Olympic shocked our community. But few have been concerned enough to examine the relationship of that incident to the unsavoury tendency to organise soccer clubs on ethnic lines. That ugly episode has an important lesson for people who have created a virtue out of cultural separation.

Multiculturalism as conceived at present has no place in a democratic society. The democratic society is characterised by the absence of discrimination and the presence of individual freedom. In such a society there is cultural freedom and the freedom of conscience. An individual is free to engage in cultural activity by himself or in association with others. If one wishes to live in isolation, he may do so. But he also has the freedom to intermingle and interact. What is not permissible in a truly free society is the imposition of rules of behaviour or the state sponsorship of culture. Culture belongs to the people and its destiny must remain in their hands. A society based on the satisfaction of individual needs through voluntary exchange is fertile ground for cultural enrichment. Wave upon wave of immigrants have come to Australia not because of a state-guaranteed cultural environment but because of the expectation that Australia affords the freedom and opportunity for individual advancement. Far from discouraging migration, the Anglomorph culture of Australia, with its liberal political traditions, has served as a major attraction to immigrants.

The expectation of migrants that Australian society will afford opportunities for them to satisfy their material, spiritual and cultural needs has largely been realised by the liberal character of the Australian institutions and the deep conviction in the liberal way of life shared by the Australian community. Propagandists for multiculturalism obscure the fact that Australia without its patronising governments and do-gooders is one of the most tolerant societies on earth. This may not be apparent to propagandists of multiculturalism but it is abundantly clear to migrants, the majority of whom have left oppression of one sort or another. Australia is not free of bigotry and prejudice. But relative to other nations this country's tolerance of immigrants is second to none. Multiculturalism is yet another example of governments trying to cure the imperfections of society

through condescending theories and short-sighted political actions. It is a part of the “constructivist fallacy” which F.A. Hayek so lucidly exposed in his book, *“Law, Legislation and Liberty.”*

If the proponents of multiculturalism care to ascertain the views and perceptions of the silent majority they will surly find that what endears Australia to immigrants is not simply its abundant riches but its political traditions which, until recently, have enabled individuals to live their personal lives without government interference. They will find that most immigrants would rather not see Australia acquire the traits and characteristics which made their own homelands inhospitable to them.

*To read more from Dr Mark Cooray visit his website at [www.ourcivilisation.com/cooray/cooray.htm](http://www.ourcivilisation.com/cooray/cooray.htm)*